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Uncategorized

The Kult of Kenneth Anger

24 May, 2013

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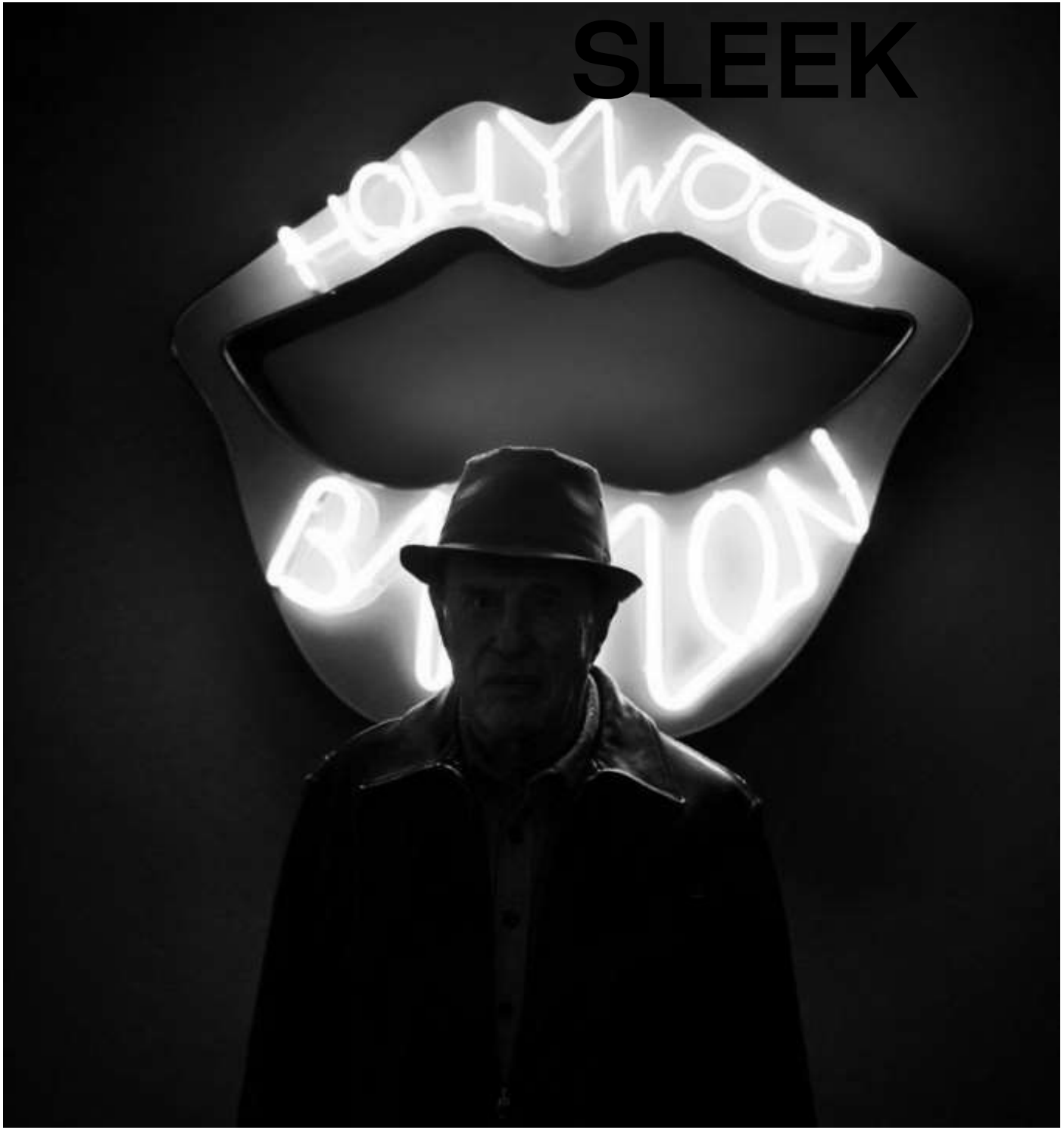
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HOLLYWOOD

Octogenarian occultist, disciple of Aleister Crowley, Hollywood's first openly gay avant-garde filmmaker: Kenneth Anger may be many things, but here he is, present one February afternoon in 2013 as he walks into his own "Icons" exhibition at Berlin's Sprüth Magers, bringing a red-and-blue vapour trail of myth and mystery with him. The iconic cinéaste with the literal cult following is looking at the display of his own collection of early Hollywood ephemera, an obsession he's an authority on, just as he is on Crowley, "the wickedest man in the world".

It seems like Kenneth Anger is everywhere today, and the man with the giant Lucifer tattoo across his chest has got the art world under a (proverbial) spell. Anger is responsible for some of the most controversial and tantalising experimental films ever made: films which changed visual language forever. His pioneering editing techniques and use of music for conveying narratives have shaped everything from music videos to now-standard practices in visual communication. Yet his subjects are everything but standard: from his early work "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" to the mesmerising "Lucifer Rising", Anger provided

the visual representations of occult themes relating to the writings of Crowley and the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), in which he is a Magus.

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As often is the case with creative production around underground, counter-culture and subversive material, it takes the art world several decades (and a couple of influential names advocating) to embrace it, put it in travelling shows, biennales and museums, and provide a theoretical framework to underline its significance. For Anger, however, expanding his audience hasn't changed much about the way he works; he is still making underground films with meagre means. But as he mentioned time and again, he is NOT going to churn out a third edition of his gossip tome "Hollywood Babylon" to finance his films as he did with the first two volumes – not that he doesn't have enough material for a new scandal-filled paperback.

SLEEK: Your show at Sprüth Magers Berlin is called "Icons", for the Hollywood icons in it, but also the way it's set up is like religious iconography, where images are imbued with the spiritual essence of the person depicted.

Kenneth Anger: Well, you caught the two sides, Hollywood icons and their essence. The things I've chosen for the exhibit reflect the kind of charisma that certain Hollywood stars have, as far as the actors go. I have Rudolf Valentino, and as balance, with a woman I have the star Billie Dove, the romance of Howard Hughes. I knew her when I lived in Palm Springs and she lived nearby in a place called Rancho Mirage, we became friends down there... she was pleased that I knew so much about her past! (Laughs)

There are some interesting newspaper clippings on view too…

Yes, there's a Valentino clipping about his divorce from Natacha Rambova, a very tempestuous woman. And the other one is about Aleister Crowley, he's a special interest of mine. I have a collection of his books and I went to live in the ruins of his villa in Cefalù in Sicily, the Abbey of Thelema, founded in 1920. Unfortunately today it's a ruin. I've been back several

times, the first time was in 1950, but now a tree has fallen on the roof. I spent one summer removing the whitewash that was put on by Mussolini's police. You see, Mussolini didn't like Englishmen and Crowley particularly. [Crowley] spent two years living in Cefalu. He was expelled by Mussolini in 1923 and went to Tunisia. But he spent most of his time painting the walls of the villa with magical murals, which were later covered in whitewash. I took colour photos after I uncovered them. He used very bright colours, and good oil paints that he had bought in Paris, so they survived under the whitewash.

When you were making films in the Fifties and Sixties they were recognised in Europe by Jean Cocteau and other avant-garde filmmakers, but not in America. These same films are receiving art world recognition now – how do you see the transition from counter culture to more mainstream art world fame?

I can't see any change; personally, I'm still an underground artist. I haven't sold out to Hollywood – because I didn't have any offers! I make short films, ciné-poèmes, little film poems, sometimes four minutes long, but I don't make features – by choice. I could at some point maybe approach the industry but I decided I'd be an independent filmmaker artist and not work for the studios. Also, it's highly unlikely I'd be approached. I'm considered too much of a maverick.

You're showing a new work here, "Airship", a collection of footage of Zeppelins, painted in ominous, hazy red and blue. Do you remember the Hindenburg exploding?

I was quite young but I remember it yes, my grandmother was fascinated by Zeppelins too, there was a sister craft to the Hindenburg that went on a tour that was called the Graf Zeppelin. In its world tour it flew down the west coast, from San Francisco to Los Angeles and it crossed over us. I remember seeing this big silver fish! And I just love them because, you see, Zeppelins were like an air-ship, like on the water, the same speed as a ship, so it allowed people to see the landscape because they flew quite low. It's a totally different expe-

rience. They used hydrogen gas which led to the fatal explosion in 1937 of the Hindenburg, which was possibly caused by static electricity; there was a thunderstorm, Armour says it might have been sabotage, I don't think so, no one knows for sure. That adds to the mystery. It was filmed, and that was the end of Zeppelins. There was a crew to film the landing, they (Hindenburg) were coming off from South America to New Jersey, and so there was a cameraman not expecting the explosion when all of a sudden it lit up.

When did you see the actual footage?

I saw the footage later of course; but there was a famous recording of a radio announcer who was broadcasting it live so you get the panic in his voice. I have used that in my airship trilogy. Basically the Zeppelins were silver but I added the red and blue, and also the colour of the explosion. I did the hand colouring, the orange and yellow of the flames were coloured in by me. That's my artistic licence.

Kathryn Bigelow cited you as influence for her work recently.

She does extraordinary work. I haven't seen "Zero Dark Thirty" yet. I did see "The Hurt Locker" and liked it. Very unusual for a woman. The subject matter – war and everything – seems like a masculine thing, but it's interesting to see a woman's perspective, or this particular woman's attitude towards the subject. You need the woman's voice to see through the haze and smoke.

Women in your films are mythological, spiritual characters like Lilith, the scarlet woman, Isis… they're not necessarily always peaceful

The scarlet woman was the high priestess according to Crowley, and he had a number of these women, and he always had them dye their hair red [laughs]. There was continuity there. Some of them were natural red heads. For me the ideal scarlet woman would be Clara Bow, she had natural red hair. She was the sex bomb full of life and excitement of the silent film days; a star of American late silent. Have you ever seen any Clara Bow? No? Well you've missed something! The films still exist. These are all the mythological spiritual side of women. I never made a film about a housewife. The scarlet woman is maybe a little bit like the Whore of Babylon, the mystic whore, not the one who takes money.

One of your unrealised projects is a film version of Gnostic Mass. Will it ever be completed?

I did a film study in black and white. And if I can find the money I would redo it in colour, but I won't release the black and white. Thirty five millimeter film is very expensive, you see. It's the professional size and it's also the best colour, like Agfa or Eastman, whichever, but I can't afford it myself. It's a speaking film, too. Most of mine are silent with music but the Gnostic Mass is written by Aleister Crowley, and it has a role for the Priestess, the Priest and the Deacon. There are about five speaking parts. It's based on Crowley's text, I didn't rewrite it but its scripted in a narrative. It's the equivalent of if you'd film a Catholic mass, there's nothing obscure about it, there's a few magical words that you'd have to know what they mean, but most of it is in English.

Do you not work with digital?

I do now, my more recent films that are being shown in Düsseldorf [at Venus & Apollo, the Project space of the Julia Stoschek Foundation] are digital. One is on a friend of mine who committed suicide, [the musician] Elliott Smith. He was 34 when he shot himself. A stupid quarrel over a girlfriend, not a reason to shoot yourself, but he was obsessed with death I'm

afraid, because the first record he made of his singing was called Suicide Records. So he had this obsession that led to an early death at 34, but I filmed him singing. It's the only movie I ever made with live singing, it's called "Elliot Suicide". But digital to me is just another means of capturing image.

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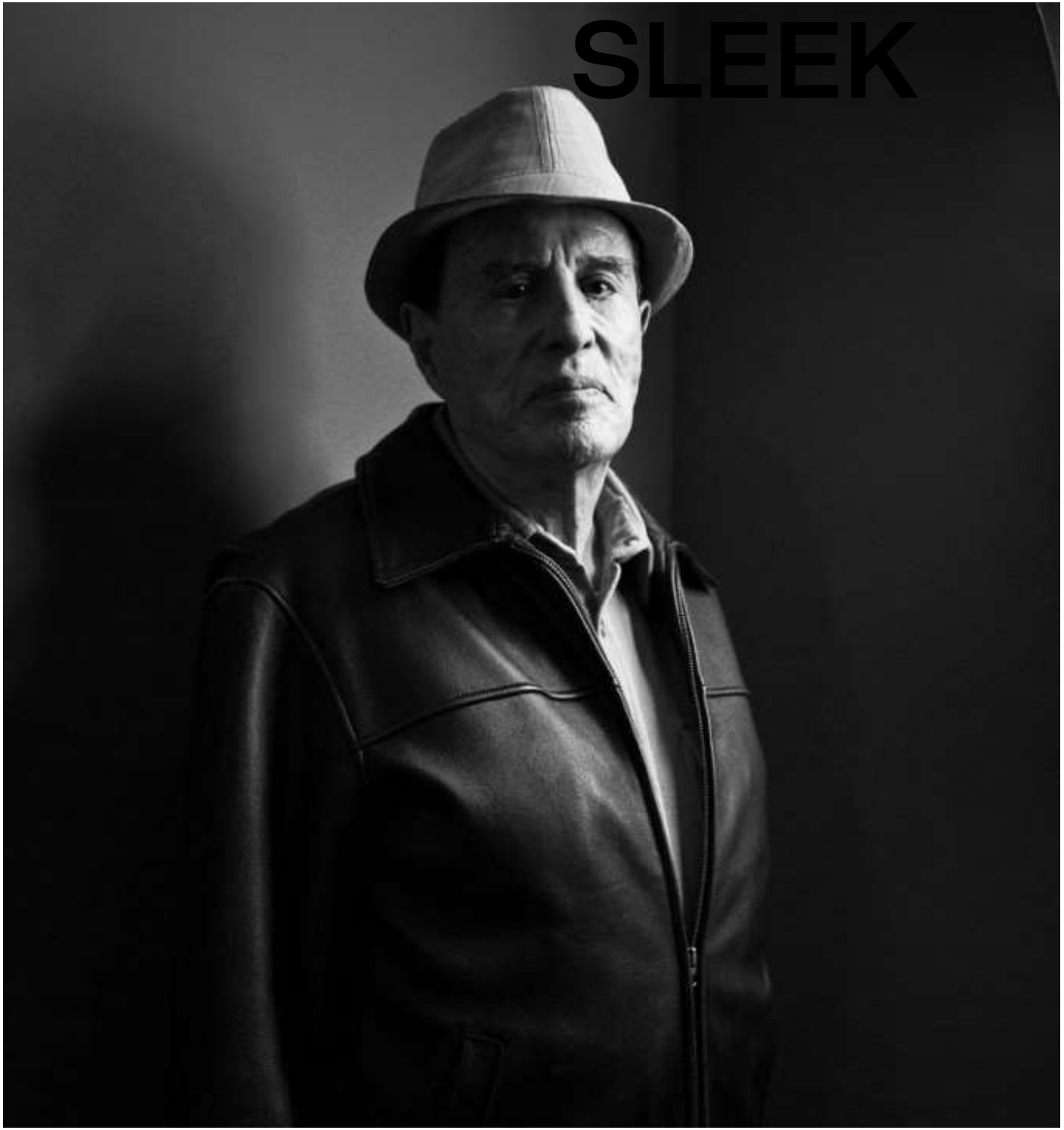
Thelema is experiencing a revival now, you see it funnelled into music and trends.

It can be picked up and superficially played with, anyone can do it, it isn't a secret the books are there, there's no violation of copyright, and if there is, believe me no one is going to get sued for using texts by Crowley.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It's susceptible to being superficially dealt with, though. How would you recommend approaching it?

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"Lucifer Rising"] and he is in prison for life because of his association with Manson. I visited

od: Veronica Garcia-Arteaga 10 x 10 in Food: David Begg 10 x 10 in Food: Benjamin Kren Bollmann

him once in prison, and once was enough. I have nothing to say. What are you going to say? "Cheer up"?

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I think it resurfaced recently because some members of the Manson family are going to be released…

Some of the girls have been let out. I'll find out when I get back to LA. I've met Franco, he's very ambitious, we did something together, worked on his film for 7 For All Mankind.

You are obviously an avid collector of Hollywood ephemera. The rooms downstairs are set up like the rooms housing the collection in your apartment. Can people come and view your home collection?

No, I used to have a place where I had each room designed red and blue and that was my suggestion to them for this show, more or less like at home, but now I keep most of my collection in storage, but it goes out to different places. Like the exhibit here is pretty large for a travelling exhibit.

Two years ago when you came to Berlin and gave a talk it was so crowded; a new generation is discovering your work. Do you relate to that?

Anyone who wants to do creative things I relate to. I don't particularly relate to the ones who want to break into the so-called industry, making commercial films. If they want to be an artist and work on the sideline that's more interesting to me. But I'm glad if I have inspired someone.

Let's do the photo, I'd like to go with the neon sign of the lips.

Why lips?

The symbol of a Hollywood star...

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Taken from Sleek 37, the "Fake/Folk" issue.

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